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BY REBUILDING SCHOOLS, V CORPS SOLDIERS ARE REBUILDING IRAQ'S ECONOMY, FUTURE

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FORWARD OPERATING BASE PALIWODA, Iraq -- In the past year, Soldiers from Task Force Danger, led by V Corps' 1st Infantry Division have helped the people of Balad refurbish and rebuild their schools, and their children's futures.

"In the past students had to overcome obstacles not related to education. Their old facilities were mud huts where hornets built hives in the summer. The new facilities will be better equipped for handling the environment and have better learning conditions," said 1st Lt. Martin Rafter a development officer with the division's 1st Battalion, 77th Armor.

"We've built four new schools that are complete and have broken ground on eight more," said Rafter. "We have worked very close with the 3rd Battalion, 72nd Engineer Regiment, and they have helped to fund these schools for us. We have also renovated a number of other schools."

The troops have also put a lot of effort into supplying those schools.

"We have spent over a million dollars on schools and supplies so far," Rafter said.

"Handing out backpacks filled with school supplies is one of the projects we do. We also send boxes of school supplies to the families."

Children love it when the Soldiers hand out these supplies, he said.

"Some children are intimidated by the Americans, but this is a chance for the Soldiers to talk to the kids and to interact with them," he added.

But handing out supplies often is the tail end of a long process. Balad's school buildings are worn down and haven't been renovated for decades, so the Americans help repair them. There are schools in the country that are two-room mud huts with no windows, plumbing or electricity, and almost unbearable in the summer heat, he said. Some old schools try to fit up to 300 students in a day, with half coming in the morning and half in the afternoon because of the lack of space, said Rafter.

Fixing schools is one of the most common ways the Iraqi people ask coalition forces to help their communities, said Rafter.

"When we build a new school, it makes them appreciate us even more and it gives more credibility to the city council."

The projects also help the Iraqi economy by putting local contractors and laborers to work.

"In some of the smaller towns, when we build a school we use the workers of that area. We have employed whole towns for a few months by building a school."

Working with the Iraqi people, Rafter said, the troops aren't just building schools. They're building the future of Iraq.

